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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000787

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: DEFINING THE ROOTS OF OPPOSITION

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (C) Introduction and Comment: Beyond the constantly changing parties which define Georgia's opposition inside and outside of parliament, there are four core groups that have fundamentally opposed President Saakashvili since the early days of his tenure in 2004. In large part, these are the people and institutions which lost positions, prestige and power with President Shevardnadze's resignation. Four groups emerged: the police and security services, the first families of Tbilisi, those who had supported the Rose Revolution but were quickly disillusioned by President Saakashvili's consolidation of executive power in 2004, and a small group that has left the United National Movement within the last year. Deputy Foreign Minister and Saakashvili insider Giga Bokeria told us in the summer of 2008 that Saakashvili has always raced the clock -- he believed that he did not have the luxury of developing consensus in order to bring irreversible democratic change to Georgia. That mentality has kept these opponents firmly entrenched in the cafes and universities of Tbilisi's elite neighborhoods in Vake and Saburtalo. One constant criticism of President Saakashvili is that he "threw out the good with the bad" of Shevardnadze's team. These four groups now form the core of opposition which seeks to bring about Saakashvili's resignation.

¶2. (C) The key to understanding Saakashvili, is understanding his history as a politician. When he, Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze led the Rose Revolution, they made big promises about Georgia's future: promises of economic prosperity, increased democracy, and membership in Western organizations including NATO and the EU. Saakashvili has made notable progress in some of these areas and less in others. Part of understanding who opposes Saakashvili requires understanding the high expectations which were raised and the unrealized promises of the President. These groups are scattered throughout a variety of parties and support different leaders. The four groups do not capture all of those who oppose Saakashvili, but they represent the crux of the supporters for current radical protests calling for the President's resignation. Understanding the long-term perspective of those in the opposition helps explain why some are singularly intent on Saakashvili's resignation. End Introduction and Comment.

Police, Security and the Over-50 Crowd

¶3. (C) Following the 2003 Rose Revolution and Saakashvili's election as president in early 2004, Saakashvili's government decided to quickly end corruption in the police by simply firing all of them. They integrated special forces scattered around the government in an effort to hold them accountable to the President rather than ministers. The move was designed to end petty corruption on the street, which the government largely succeeded in doing. As President Saakashvili routinely notes, he terminated the bulk of the traffic police, whose primary role was to collect insignificant bribes for real or imagined traffic violations

while standing on Georgia's street corners. The firing of those traffic police created an immediate, tangible benefit for Georgia's drivers -- but it also alienated an older generation of police who felt entitled to these revenue streams. It is not entirely clear how many police lost their jobs following the Rose Revolution, but government officials Qjobs following the Rose Revolution, but government officials routinely cite about 200,000 throughout the country.

¶4. (C) In addition to the street cops, Saakashvili decided to skip a generation of Georgia's elite throughout the government when he successfully attracted young 20-something, western-educated but politically inexperienced Georgians to the government. Many diplomats at the MFA tell us that those who came out of MGIMO or Soviet diplomacy have seen their careers come to a standstill, although, of course, the current Foreign Minister is the exception. He was trained in Moscow and began his diplomatic career in the Soviet Foreign Ministry. In a recent meeting, President Saakashvili told a visiting senior U.S. official that he had to skip over a generation -- he needed people who did not remember the Soviet period to help him enact his ambitious reform agenda. Saakashvili admitted, however, that within the defense arena, he needed the expertise of military officials and could not reject out of hand those with Soviet experience. In an April conversation with the Ambassador, Deputy PM Gia Baramidze said that, following the Rose Revolution, Saakashvili and his team had no choice but to move fast. Georgia was at risk of becoming a failed state and immediate action was needed.

Tbilisi's First Families

¶5. (C) Many observers of Tbilisi's elite recognize that,

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like many capitals around the world, an unofficial and socially-accepted group of "first families" has played an important role in the society. Through the Soviet period and Shevardnadze's presidency, these families wielded significant influence. They could easily pick up a phone to have a family member admitted to a prestigious university or help a friend find a job with a Western salary. They were socially influential individuals with known family pedigrees. They primarily live in Tbilisi's toniest neighborhood, Vake.

¶6. (C) These families had, and have, expectations of an elevated role in Georgian society. They believe, according to our interlocutors, they are entitled to a privileged role in society. With the reform of Georgia's education system -- led by current Georgian Ambassador to the UN Kakha Lomaia who previously served as Minister of Education -- corruption in the universities largely ended. Poloff has been anecdotally told of some doctors, who could barely pass basic science classes, graduating with honors from medical school because of graft. Since 2004, university applicants are required to pass standardized tests. The days when parentage or wealth guaranteed admittance to a prestigious university and career are over. Parents were humiliated when their under-achieving children were denied admittance to Tbilisi State University or Chavchavadze University. These families derisively dismiss the president as being "provincial" because he did not emanate from this group and because he does not protect their entitlements.

The Disillusioned and Disappointed

¶7. (C) A third significant segment of the opposition is a small but politically-committed group that stood with Saakashvili, Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze during the Rose Revolution. They opposed the corruption of the Shevardnadze era. Most notable among this group are Dato Usupashvili (now with the Alliance for Georgia) and his wife political activist Tina Khidasheli. They supported Saakashvili initially in 2003, but immediately moved into an opposition camp following changes to Georgia's constitution in 2004 which led to enhanced executive powers. Koba

Davitashvili (Party of the People) is another example of a political figure who supported Saakashvili in 2003, but broke with him following the constitutional changes in 2004 and the changes to the status of Ajara's autonomy (also spring 2004). Usupashvili and Davitashvili stand proudly on principle but are generally considered to have little popular support.

Seeking Opportunity Beyond the UNM

18. (C) Those who have left the United National Movement since the November 2007 protests form the final group. Oddly enough, Saakashvili lost few senior party members immediately following the severe actions taken against protesters in 2007. Nino Burjanadze, former Speaker of Parliament and acting President, did not leave the UNM fold when the police moved on protesters, nor did she leave as a response to allegations of inappropriate activities during the January 2008 presidential elections. She left in May 2008 when, according to one of her long-time supporters, she had a disagreement with President Saakashvili over the placement of her supporters on the UNM party list. Upon her resignation, Burjanadze announced she intended to devote her energies to a new think tank which would provide oversight of the administration and the parliament. But after the August war, she quickly entered party politics by launching her own party, Democratic-Movement, United Georgia. During the April protests, she has been criticized by people in the street for her perceived role in the events of November 2007.

19. (C) Former PM Zurab Noghaideli left office in January 2008 with extremely low favorability ratings, according to IRI and NDI polling. He was basically moved out so that the President could show he was being responsive, although officially health reasons were cited, but he re-emerged as a politician after the August war and has focused his platform largely on economic failures by the president. The most recent and highest profile defector from the UNM is former Ambassador to the UN Irakli Alasania and his team of supporters, the Alliance for Georgia. They have publicly stated and privately told us that they felt compelled to leave the President's team and launch their political efforts because of the President's incompetence in handling the events of August 2008. Their platform is based on improving the functioning of Georgia's national security structure. Alasania leads a team comprised primarily of former diplomats and government officials -- well-known figures whose names engender respect throughout Georgia. The Alliance for Georgia includes several former Ambassadors and has sharply criticized President Saakashvili for leading hasty and poorly-informed decision-making processes, and Alasania

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promises a more responsive and inclusive approach to governance. Since Alasania has only been a political actor since February, it remains to be seen how much traction he will gain for his movement.

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